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SECURITY INFORMATION

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

23 July 1952

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 259

SUBJECT: Current Political Situation in South Korea

1. President Syngman Rhee has won an almost complete victory in his long and recently acute struggle for power with the opposition in the National Assembly. On 4 July the National Assembly, subjected to intimidation and other forms of severe pressure from Rhee and the group around him, and no longer hopeful of strong US-UN intervention to retain constitutional procedures, adopted a "compromise" constitutional amendment. The amendment includes Rhee's principal demands -- for popular election of the President (thus assuring Rhee's re-election) and the formation of a bicameral Assembly.^{1/} The new provisions allowing the Assembly to overthrow the Cabinet by a vote of non-confidence and requiring the Prime Minister's approval^{2/} of all appointments to the Cabinet are ambiguous and are unlikely to increase the power of the Assembly.

^{1/} Elections for the President and Vice President and for members of the new "upper" house are expected in mid-August. The present Assemblymen will constitute the "lower" house. Their term expires in 1954.

^{2/} The Constitution has always required Assembly approval of the President's designee for Prime Minister. Constitutionally, however, all executive powers were vested in the President and the "Prime Minister" was -- and remains -- nothing more than the President's Chief administrator.

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2. Most non-Rhee elements have accepted the "compromise" resolution of the political crisis as the best way out under the circumstance. The opposition in the Assembly, although now recovering somewhat from its recent experiences, has neither the strength nor the will to create serious difficulties for Rhee in the next few months.

3. The opposition and political neutrals are now concentrating on Yi Pom-Sok, Rhee's Home Minister. Yi is distrusted in all Korean political circles and is regarded as being primarily responsible for the recent intimidation of the Assembly.

4. For the immediate future, political stability in South Korea will be most influenced by the outcome of a developing struggle for power among the Rhee group. Yi Pom-Sok is attempting to run for Vice-President in the forthcoming election. In view of Rhee's age and physical condition, Yi would almost certainly become acting President* before his 4-year term was over. This would permit him to consolidate his control over South Korea, with a consequent loss in popular support for the government, in combat effectiveness of the armed forces, and in progress toward economic development and constitutional government.

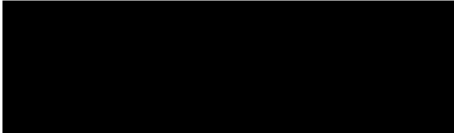
5. Yi's present entrenched position and his pretensions to power apparently have given Rhee considerable concern. On 16 July Rhee reportedly gave Yi a severe tongue-lashing before the Assembled Cabinet, making it plain to Yi that Rhee, alone, was running South Korea. On previous occasions Yi has been used to undertake specific political assignments for Rhee and then has been removed from the government. If Rhee is again able to remove Yi from the government and retains Chang Taek Sang or appoints another effective Prime Minister, following the election, the prospects for a more efficient and stable administration of South Korea will be reasonably good. However, Rhee's chances, even if he so wished, of being able to rid himself of Yi and returning to a policy of moderation appear about even.

* Constitutionally, the Vice-President does not actually succeed to the presidency in the event of the death or incapacity of the incumbent President. The Vice-President carries out the President's functions until a new election can be held. In practice, however, Yi would probably be able to "act" until the end of the term or call an election under conditions assuring his return to office.


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6. The foregoing discussion has been based on the assumption, almost universal in Korea, that Rhee will be re-elected President. However, there have been recent indications that Rhee is depressed about his health and is seriously considering retirement. If Rhee should retire, another political crisis will almost certainly develop; the Yi Fom-Sok group will attempt to gain control of South Korea, and will probably succeed.

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